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ABSTRACT

For many years, writing centers have based their pedagogy on "collaboration." Now it is time to reflectively examine whether tutorial collaborations actually correspond to those definitions on which it is generally assumed they are based. Current practices assume that "collaborative" practices include non-authoritative pedagogy that fosters students' independence to compose and promotes their ability to critically assess their own writing. But is this true? Brian Street ("Literacy in Theory and Practice"), Suzanne Clark and Lisa Ede ("Collaboration, Resistance, and the Teaching of Writing") suggest that teachers look at their classroom collaborations and determine just what it is that they are promoting. Unless they do, they risk maintaining and supporting the very structures of disempowerment they claim to resist. (Transcripts of two exchanges between a writing-center tutor and a student, and a five-item bibliography are included.) (SAM)

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**When What We Say Isn't What We Do:
Learning to Collaborate All Over Again**

For many years writing centers have based their pedagogy on "collaboration". At the outset, collaborative methodology seemed new, and we investigated and experimented with definitions and pedagogy relating to it: we tried to figure out what collaboration meant, how it could work, whether it promoted writing. Yet perhaps, as with all theories and practices, it is time to reflectively examine whether our tutorial collaborations actually correspond to those definitions upon which we assume we have based them. It is time to examine how we engage in collaborative dialogue.

If we ascribe to "collaboration" in the way Bruffee does, then students are not only invited into the conversation, they actively participate. If we use "collaboration" in the ways discussed by Belanky et al, then collaboration should accommodate the different learning environments necessary to different populations so they each contribute what they can in their own way. But if we use "collaboration" in the way that Lunsford and Ede do in Singular Texts/Plural Authors, then work within a tutorial depends on context and subjects: it can be hierarchical or dialogic. However, no matter which definition of collaboration a writing center prefers, each usually claims that the writing tutor explicitly withdraws from ownership or control over a paper. Our practices, built upon our research, assume that "collaborative" practices include non-authoritative pedagogy that fosters students' independence to compose and promotes their ability to critically assess their own writing.

So I had this age old writing center conversation with myself:

Do we really promote independence in the writing center? -- that ability to begin and finish a paper on one's own?

Yes, I do believe I can garner enough evidence to demonstrate that most students do learn how to write a more acceptable academic paper after they work with a tutor in the writing center.

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Do we give students the ability to critically assess their own work?

Yes, I think that we do help students develop strategies with which they can "read" their own papers.

As a service, therefore, writing centers often deliver what they promise. But I would like to open up our conversation about writing center collaborations and the implications of how we define them.

OVERHEAD *** HANDOUTS

Questions: What is the nature of the collaboration in #1?

Even if we agree that the collaboration present involves too much tutor direction, I would be surprised if we could all honestly assure each other that none of this kind of direction ever happens in our centers. While it may not be what we promote, it is precisely an example of the collaboration many faculty fear we practice. It is the one that worries them and that we continually deny -- that we <u>help</u> students write papers.

We claim we do not. We claim that we are providing strategies, not answers, ways of thinking or writing that will empower students. What, however, are we empowering them to do, and why are we empowering them to do it?

Last week George came into the writing center with three, seven to ten page papers due in a week: one was on modern art, one on Walden, and one on multicultural education. The first demanded largely description, the second, on Walden, was a topic familiar to George. He enjoyed discussing "how society makes you do things you don't want to, like go to college." As we read through his last paper on multiculturalism, though, I found it impossible to understand what George was saying; grammatical structures aside, he misused words, seemed not to understand their contexts. By the time we got to the end of the first page, my brain was on overload, and I asked him, "You don't really agree with the aims of multi-cultural education, do you?" "No," he said. "Why not?" I asked, "Let's list your reasons." And we did.

- *First, as a second year art education major, George didn't understand why people just couldn't agree to see issues one way (preferably the way issues had always been seen, he said)--it was, after all, easier!*

- *Second, George didn't think he would ever use the knowledge he learned about other cultures -- in any practical way. He's not a traveler, he said.*

- *And third, he thought that the education system worked just fine. "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," he quoted.*

Throughout my attendance at conferences on writing pedagogy and writing center pedagogy, I have been taught various ways to handle this instance. What would you have done? ******
What have you trained your tutors to do? *****
I may not have responded in the best way. I suggested he write the paper using the ideas he really believed. He said his instructor wouldn't like it because she liked multiculturalism. So I said, "Maybe you could write what you believe and say that these are some possible objections to MC". He proceeded to do so. BUT > > >

And I kept wondering, Why is this student in college? It was clear from our conversation about Walden and from subsequent conversations that he didn't want to be here. He chose art education because he "liked to draw but wasn't good enough to be an artist and I don't like anything else." He was pressured by his parents to go to college and felt alien, disconnected from the whole experience. Dominated by a cultural necessity to get a degree, George presented him-self for sacrifice at the altar of academe.

I did not want to be his high priestess of academic language. Yet when faced with some students, very much like George, who come to the center, I often feel compelled to bestow the words -- to treat rhetoric as magic in much the same way William Covino warns against in "Magic, Literacy and the National Enquirer".

"Give me the key," they seem to be asking. "Teach me to think like you, talk like you, act like you, so I can pass for you." My "collaboration is in danger of being reduced to prescription in ways more subtle, but just as damaging as the earlier model. We can all agree with Covino when he points out that rhetoric reduced to prescriptive magic is reductive, restricts choices, promotes mass academic culture and results not in integration but in adaptation (27). The student is not empowered but inoculated.

In Suzanne Clark's and Lisa Ede's article "Collaboration, Resistance, and the Teaching of Writing," Clark and Ede question the use of collaboration in the classroom. They ask the same question I have about our tutorials: "What model of literacy is implied by current theories of collaborative learning and composition studies? (276)" and, to add one more question, how does that affect our ability to work "collaboratively" with students?

Clark and Ede point out that "Despite teachers' intentions collaborative learning practices can enable teachers merely to embody their authority 'in the more effective guise of class consensus,' which, according to [Greg] Myers, can have 'a power over individual students that a teacher cannot have'(277)." Does the tutor, as a peer and/or collaborative friend, merely reinforce the authority of the teacher? Despite the fact that we

are in our writing centers does tutor consensus take the place of forceful classroom consensus in promoting particular kinds of academic ideologies? Are we empowering our students to think like academics or to think critically? Are these two questions the same or different?

Clark and Ede continue: "despite collaborative learning advocates' commitment to democratic and liberatory literacy education, theories supporting collaborative learning in composition studies imply a restricted view of literacy, one that inherently denies the importance of [and in the writing center, one that may ignore the existence of] culture, ideology, and politics in daily life. (278)" If this is true of any writing center, then it cannot pretend to function as a "neutral site of learning" anymore than a classroom can. Yet at many of our conferences we continue to talk about our neutrality -- our safe harbors.

Lunsford and Ede point out that most of the collaborative writers interviewed for Singular Texts/Plural Authors placed a

> strong emphasis on efficiency -- on collaborative writing as a means to an end. . . This goal-driven pragmatism tends to view language primarily as a tool, a means of getting the job done, one that in turn suggests that language itself is neutral. . . Collaborative writers aiming pragmatically at efficiency do not have occasion to consider the way language constructs varying economic or political agendas" (43).

When collaboration is practiced with a pragmatic end in view -- as is true of many of our students, peers and colleagues -- a particular view of literacy is promoted which continues to disempower students, reminding them that there are dominant forms of language and **A** dominant type of literacy which they must learn in order to have a culturally sanctioned identity. When A type of literacy is allowed to dominate, students will subject themselves to it if, in return, that subjugation holds the promise of return: i.e., more money, better job opportunities, status within a pecking order. The idea that language is a tool or means to a goal is, as Lunsford and Ede continue, "at odds with the view widely held in our profession -- of writing as a means of discovery, of getting in touch with the self, of coming to know rather than report"(44). This philosophy conflicts not only with our students' and with their expectations when they enter the writing center, but also produces a tension within tutors and who succumb to that pressure and to their own pragmatic view of collaboration. Such pressures change the dynamics and the "empowering" capabilities of any tutorial.

Brian V. Street, in *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, notes that an economic or pragmatic model of literacy

> assumes a single direction in which literacy development can be traced, and associates it with 'progress,''civilization,'individual liberty and social

> mobility. It attempts to distinguish literacy from schooling. It isolates literacy as an independent variable and then claims to be able to study its consequences. These consequences are classically represented in terms of economic 'take off' or in terms of cognitive skills. (2) (Clark and Ede 278)

Street, Clark, Ede, and other researchers are asking that we look at our classroom collaborations and determine just what it is that we are promoting. I am asking the same of our tutorial collaborations. I think we have several options we can claim, some of which include that we are:

- trying to help students complete a paper that is due tomorrow;

- trying to help students critically assess the discourse community for whom they are writing;

- helping students speak academe (biology-speak, English lit.- speak, history-speak, academic;

- trying to help those students without prior educational opportunities, improve their communication skills;

- trying to help those who have the misfortune of getting Professor You-Supply-The-Name get through the class with their self-esteem intact;

- pretending to listen to students' ideas, pretending to be a sounding board where they can be honest, and then correcting their ideas so they better reflect those of an educated person today;

- covertly performing a service to the university; we are sustaining the very notions of authority implicit in language and education, while claiming to empower students;

- inviting them in and then fixing them.

All of the above.

None of the above.

A few of the above.

Which of these best reflect our *original* intentions of collaborating in order to empower the students?

As I reflect on some of the tensions that have been identified in writing center tutorials, many of them derive from our need to support academic culture, and from a felt sense that as tutors, we are being less than honest in providing such support. I am not asking that we stop our collaborations. In

fact, I am sure that some of our collaborations have indeed allowed for a space where students can question the very culture they are joining. I AM asking that we begin to re-examine what we are promoting, under what guise we may be promoting it and why. While many of our tutor training sessions include needed reflections on gender and race, we also need to examine our concepts of collaboration, to look at the political, cultural and social agendas that have and continue to direct not only our concepts, but the translation of those into our practices. Unless we examine, define clearly to ourselves as well as our communities the various collaborations in which we are willing to engage, we risk maintaining, in fact, supporting those very structures of disempowerment we claim to resist.

SESSION #1

Tutor: Hi Sally, I'm Leslie. What are you working on today?

Sally: I'm supposed to write a short paper about the symbolism in *The Scarlet Letter*. Since "scarlet" is in the title, I'm gonna do that.

Tutor: O.K., have you started yet?

Sally: No, I've just been thinking about how a scarlet letter means adultery, and you, know, whore houses and all that.

Tutor: Do you think of anything else when you think of the color red?

Sally: Well, [a pause] blood, roses ... [pause]

Tutor: Do you think of fire?

Sally: Yeah, fire too.

Tutor: And how does fire tie in to this story about guilt and sin?

Sally: Well, the sin is bad, [pause] and the people thought she was a witch; they burned witches.

Tutor: Yes they did burn witches, but once a witch was burned what did they think happened to her?

Sally: After she was dead? (tutor nods) Well . . . Oh! she'd go to hell -- fire! . . . That's like Dimmesdale's A....

Tutor: O.K., so guilt, Dimmesdale's A, fire, sin, Hester, adultery, hell, what does that all suggest?

Sally: Well, that Hester and Dimmesdale were covered in red, covered with fire? Or probably going to hell?

Tutor: Did the people believe that? Or Hawthorne? Or who?

Sally: The people ... so I could say that [she eventually writes]: " The color red in the Scarlet Letter is an obvious symbol because it's in the title."

Tutor: Don't forget to underline your title. Is "the" capitalized in the title?

Sally: [writing after correcting the first sentence and rereading it] "But what does it mean? If we think about it, red brings to mind the guilt, sin and hell fire of Hester and Dimmesdale." There.

Tutor: O.K.! . . . What do you mean by the "sin and hell fire of Hester and Dimmesdale?"

Sally: That's not right?

Tutor: Well, what does "of" mean here?

Sally: What about that people thought it . . . "If we think about it, red brings to mind the guilt, sin and hell fire [she writes] that people thought about when they thought of Dimmesdale and Hester."

Tutor: O.K. That's a good general idea to guide us through the paper.

Session #2

Tutor: Hi, how are you. Nasty day out today... was parking hard to find?

Terri: No. It looks like a lot of people didn't come in today.

Tutor: So... I'm Jim. What are you working on today, Terri?

Terri: I've got to write a paper about an early gothic cathedral -- describe what I might see if I was a villager at the time one was being built.

Tutor: So what do you think is the purpose of this assignment?

Terri: Huh?

Tutor: What is your instructor asking you to do?

Terri: Well I've got to describe what it looks like at any point in the building; you know, what was there, what tools they used, that kind of thing.

Tutor: Why do you think she wants you to do that?

Terri: Well, we're going into late gothic now, so she wants us to describe early gothic.

Tutor: I guess what I also mean is that I was wondering why your instructor wants you to do this? Is she just seeing what you know? finding out if you can repeat classroom information? asking if you can use gothic architectural terminology? asking you to write in the form of an art historian?

Terri: Well, I'm supposed to imagine I'm helping build this church. So.. um ...I guess I have to use the terms they used then. Oh, there weren't any buttresses yet so I don't have to explain them! . . . But how do I start?

Tutor: As you probably learned in composition, a lot of academic papers begin with an intro -- stating a purpose up front. But this seems like a different assignment.

Terri: The teacher said this is like a narrative -- a journal where I write observations. But I don't know what she wants!

Tutor: Journal writing is usually pretty informal, but this is an assignment. . . Do you want to call the instructor and

Terri: There was . . . wait a minute [shuffles through papers]. Here's an example from St. Denis. . . it's like he wrote it for himself, but knew someone'd read it, you know? Like I could say, 'Today I walked around the timbers that will be the new cathedral' and then just, you know, describe what's there. It's casual, but not too much . . . it tells [the instructor] I know what an early gothic cathedral is.

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